“Man grabs shark with bare hands, blames vodka”: On sharks, stereotypes, speciesism, and the late Steve Irwin

Adrian Peace

Discipline of Anthropology, University of Adelaide, adrian.peace@adelaide.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Speciesism can be defined as the belief that non-human animals warrant no place, status or recognition in the world other than what is arbitrarily decreed for them by humans, whose material and other interests as the dominant species will always take precedence. Like most other ‘-isms’, the power of speciesism lies in its generally taken-for-granted, uncritically accepted, nature. In this paper, I examine the influence of this pervasive mentality in two otherwise quite unrelated incidents, one involving an unknown ex-fisherman from a peripheral part of South Australia, the other centred on one of the country’s best known environmental entrepreneurs who lived in the public eye, as well as three shark attacks which took place in different locations on the Australian coastline. In conclusion, I suggest that the distinction between endangered and non-endangered animals is also speciesist in character, and should be critically assessed in that light, rather than being held up as a sign of enlightenment where environmental matters are concerned.

Key words: Sharks, Animal-Human Relations, Speciesism, Australia, Anthropology

> *What we must do is bring non-human animals within our sphere of moral concern and cease to treat their lives as expendable for whatever trivial purposes we may have* (Singer 2002: 45).

Death of a shark

Early in 2007, a 41-year old ex-fisherman who resided in Louth Bay at the foot of Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, realized the 15 minutes of fame to which we are all entitled when he caught a 1.3 metre bronze whaler *Carcharhinus brachyurus* with his bare hands. According to his own account, Phillip Kerkhof left his work as a bricklayer early that day before putting down ‘quite a few vodkas’ in the local pub. When he arrived at the town jetty, he was warned that ‘a bronzey was hanging around’, and before long the shark duly appeared in the shallows where it threatened the bricklayer’s squid lures. At this point, Kerkhof ‘just snapped’, stripped down to his jeans, climbed down the jetty ladder, and began (in the graphic words of a journalist) ‘to silently stalk the shark’. Then he got lucky: ‘I just snuck up behind him, and eventually went for the big grab, and I fluked and got him, eh.’

Bronze whalers are capable of inflicting severe injury on humans because they are aggressive and agile; the structure of the cartilage gives the head almost complete rotation. Kerkhof’s reading of his situation was not so technical: ‘He was just thrashing around in the water … starting to turn round and bite me and I thought “well, it’s amazing what vodka does.”’ Then he added: ‘I guess you could say it was the vodka that was spurring me on, eh.’ The hardest part of the capture involved hoisting the bronze whaler out of the water: ‘I was pretty pissed. It was difficult getting him onto the jetty.’ Kerkhof was verbally encouraged by several friends, and he had prior experience to draw on from Port Lincoln’s aquaculture industry where sharks forced their way into the tuna pens: ‘Sometimes if the big ones were causing trouble, we had to go down and kill them … but the small ones we would quite often just grab and throw them out’.

When Kerkhof took the bronze whaler home, his wife was underwhelmed by comparison with the mates on the jetty: ‘When he brought it home, he called “Come out here! Come outside!” I walked outside and there’s a shark on my lawn. I just shook my head because I’m used to my husband doing crazy things’. The couple were at least in agreement that the shark would not go to waste. After Phillip had skinned and gutted his trophy, Mrs Kerkhof set about cooking it. A few days later, with the head safely stored in the bait fridge, her husband pronounced the shark meat ‘bloody beautiful, mate, restaurant quality’, and announced a seafood feast at their home the following weekend: ‘There’s a few people around here who wouldn’t mind trying it, so it’ll go pretty quick’.

The Sound of Silence

There are some stories which are worth rescuing from the fleeting attention of the media, and this is one of them for several reasons.[1] The first is that this is the type of event

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[1] From the avalanche of media coverage, a good deal of it syndicated and therefore repetitive, I have drawn mostly on the following in order to construct my opening narrative: ‘Man catches shark with bare hands’, *The West* (Perth) 16.02.07, ‘Shark-eating man “just snapped”’, *The Age* (Melbourne) 16.02.07, ‘Man catches shark with bare hands’, *The Sunday Times* (Perth) 16.02.07, ‘Man attacks shark’, *The World Today, ABC Online* 16.02.07, ‘Vodka fuelled brickie wrestles shark’, *The Advertiser* (Adelaide) 17.02.07, ‘Man catches shark with bare hands’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16.02.07. For overseas coverage see, for example, ‘Australian man catches shark with bare hands, blames vodka’ *Canadian Press* 16.02.07, and ‘Drunken Australian wrestles shark’, *CNN* 16.02.07.

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from which the Australian population at large can derive a good deal of significance and meaning about their relations with wild animals. If only for a couple of days, Phillip Kerkhof's encounter with the bronze whaler was covered from several angles in regional and national newspapers, and on radio and television, so that a substantial proportion of Australians would have noted the incident and found it entertaining at least, possibly more than that. There was assuredly a range of meanings which could be extracted from this exceptional encounter between a curiosity-driven shark and a vodka-fuelled bricklayer.[2]

The second reason is that, throughout this burst of interest from the mass media, there was no attention paid to the bronze whaler's demise, which was treated as inconsequential, insignificant, barely worth a mention beyond the fact that it had occurred. There was no recognition that the shark had been, so to speak, in its own habitat, was most unlikely to hang around Kerkhof's squid lures for long, was no threat to its assailant or anyone else in the vicinity, and so on. Its killing was incidental, happenchance, quite casual in the way it came about and the manner in which it was treated. But in this studied indifference, there was one almost throwaway but distinctly revealing conclusion to a newspaper item which aimed to explain and justify the shark being put to death: 'the bronze whaler is not an endangered species' (*The Advertiser* 17. 02. 08).

The third reason is that the shark's death thus fits into, and indeed epitomizes, a broader pattern of human conduct in which the killing of wild animals for relatively insignificant, even trivial, reasons remains quite common in Australia.[3] Notwithstanding the proliferation of official rhetoric about the need for wildlife conservation in order to protect biodiversity, wild animals are extensively killed for little other reason but that they constitute a minor public nuisance, refuse to remain in natural settings where people prefer them to be, or have been identified as an often rather limited threat to the comfort of people with whom they share common territory. In recent years, brumbies (Victoria), bats (Queensland), kangaroos (ACT), swans (Victoria), kookaburras (Queensland), galahs and goats (South Australia), and even iconic dingoes (Queensland) to mention but a few, have all been (as it is euphemistically expressed) 'culled' for such reasons, usually without much by way of effective public outcry.

This kind of behaviour, I suggest, signals the extent to which speciesism[4] remains endemic in contemporary Australian society. Speciesism can be defined as the belief that non-human animals warrant no other place, status or recognition in the world than that which is decreed for them by humans, whose material and other interests will always take precedence over wildlife presence and well-being. Like all other '-isms' geared towards the reproduction of structured inequality, the power of speciesism lies in its unproblematic, commonsensical nature. It prevails as a significant mentality in society because it is routinely exercised, and is therefore considered unnecessary to acknowledge, explain or justify.

It is in this respect that the silence surrounding the shark's death, by comparison with the clamour concentrated on its human assailant, is worth interrogation. It can be taken as symptomatic of a broadly-based politics of control and domination by human animals over non-human ones, and as an anthropologist I presume that, in order to account for the way it is carried off, the devil lies in the detail. The structure of this paper is straightforward. In the next two sections, I aim to explain the contrast between the enormous attention visited on Kerkhof and the indifference accorded to the shark. Having established the speciesism at work in the relatively marginal setting of rural South Australia, I will draw out its presence in the discursive conflict generated by the death of Steve Irwin, one of the country's best known environmental entrepreneurs. I focus in particular on the remarkably hostile response generated by the critical comment on Irwin's behaviour by Germaine Greer. By way of conclusion, I emphasize the power of governmental institutions in arbitrarily classifying wild animals as endangered and non-endangered.

'Toast of the town'

Initially then, what was it about Kerkhof's conduct which made him 'the toast of the town' in the remote community of Louth Bay, whilst the death of a wild creature was treated as literally unremarkable, just part of the natural order of things? At one level, the answer lies in the idiosyncratic personality of Kerkhof himself and in the cumulative absurdity of the entire incident. From beginning to end, this particular sequence of events could be taken as emblematic of the individuality with which we generally associate rural communities, as well as providing confirmation of the stereotype that what transpires in such places could not happen anywhere else.

In still photographs taken after the event at the jetty, Kerkhof appears as a lean, tough, T-shirt-and-jeans clothed figure, heavily bearded and wearing a baseball cap.[5] Insofar as there is a working class outfit in rural Australia, this is its approximation. Next, in addition to having had several jobs (fisherman, labourer, and bricklayer),

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[2] Wilbert (2006) in particular examines the fascination in contemporary societies over aggressive encounters between humans and wild animals, and the role played by the media in contributing to their popular appeal.

[3] I hasten to add that there is nothing exceptional about Australia in this regard. See in particular the Introduction to The Animal Studies Group (2006), Herd-Rapp and Goedeke (2005), and contributions to Cassidy and Mullin eds. (2006).

[4] The term was popularized by Singer, who writes: 'Speciesism - the word is not an attractive one, but I can think of no better term - is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species' (2002:33). See also the wide-ranging study by Ryder (1989).

[5] The Fairfax Press used this image to maximum effect, especially in a lengthy piece in *The Age* 17.02.07, which was headed 'Would you sneak up on one of these sharks, grab it by the tail and wrestle it on to a pier? You might need a couple of drinks, right? So did this bloke … and he survived to tell the tale.'

Kerkhof is clearly not imbued with a strong work ethic: he knocked off early on a Monday to throw down a few drinks and then go fishing. Then again, his speech form is distinctively rural working class, as indexed by the rising inflection 'eh' with which he frequently completes his sentences through to extensive use of abbreviations such as 'bronzey' for the bronze whaler. Note that his arrival at the jetty somewhat inebriated isn't as a result of drinking beer: it is the consumption of spirits which marks him out as a drinker of note. In a pub like the one at Louth Bay, it is routine to round off a Friday night's drinking with a shot of spirits. To be pissed on vodka on a Monday afternoon is something else.

Evidently, there is something of the larrikin in Phillip Kerkhof, and the shark becomes his victim because of it. His admission to the press that he 'just snapped' on seeing the bronze whaler at his squid lures indicates a lack of emotional control, which makes him appear somewhat unstable but also somewhat endearing. All of this precedes and explains his artless decision to strip down to his jeans, enter the water, and not only grapple with the shark but manhandle it onto the jetty. Because of the second-hand and, on some details, sparse nature of media accounts, the reader is left to imagine what dexterity and strength this required, but that these would be admirable qualities in this rural place almost goes without saying.

Lastly on the subject of its appeal, the narrative comes to a fitting dénouement in the triumph of practicality as Mrs Kerkhof comes on the scene. Her reasoning is a suitable counterpoint to his emotion. Not only does Phillip admit to his conduct being 'idiotic': his wife is used to him 'doing crazy things.' But following the involvement of the sensible rural housewife, this farcical sequence has the entirely pragmatic finale of turning the bronze whaler into 'shark steaks' which are to be shared with friends and neighbours. It is the hallowed rural community that will benefit from the escapade which started out on its local jetty.

Sharks in improper places

So the immediate explanation as to why the death of the shark evinced no interest by comparison with that given to its executioner is that Kerkhof's behaviour within a quintessentially rural milieu overwhelms all other considerations. Because the madcap quality of the whole affair could be made so emblematic of eccentric rurality, any serious consideration of the bronze whaler's demise was unlikely to get much of a look in.

But there is, I propose, a more involved, deeper reason why these events not only generated widespread interest but also resulted in Kerkhof achieving a modestly heroic standing. In addition to the shark killer becoming 'the toast of the town', there is no doubt that the same accolade would be granted him in the wider region of lower Eyre Peninsula where similarly small communities predominate.[6] Even in national news coverage, the language employed by print journalists and television newsreaders intimated that Kerkhof's conduct was somewhat commendable and worthy. There is, of course, no necessary contradiction between someone behaving in an idiotic manner whilst being considered worthy of social acclaim. The palpably foolish but still worthy figure who inadvertently reveals much that is otherwise hidden from view is a frequently encountered character in the Western canon. At this point it is necessary to be more specific about the way sharks have become increasingly viewed at Louth Bay and other coastal settings.

The critical feature about Louth Bay is that to the east lies St. Vincent's Gulf which is the breeding ground of the white pointer, in the popular mind the most dangerous of all sharks. The gulf is sometimes referred to as 'the Grand Central Station' of white pointers, such is their concentration at particular times of the year, which explains why it has long been the location of documentary and fiction film making in which the species is depicted as having demonic qualities. Whenever films are made about the continent's 'most dangerous wild animals', it can be guaranteed that St. Vincent Gulf's white pointers will be depicted viciously attacking the metal cages from which underwater camera sequences are taken.

More than this, not only in South Australia but in the country at large, white pointers and other shark populations are presented as increasingly threatening to human populations by virtue of encroaching more and more on coastal spaces which are culturally the preserve of people. Sharks are represented by the media, and the governmental bodies which supply them with 'natural science', as increasingly violating the boundary between Nature and culture, especially in liminal places such as popular beaches, surf venues, dive spots, piers and jetties. I emphasize that, in historical terms, it is exactly the reverse process which has taken place through the rampant expansion of coastal suburbia, and that the annual number of deaths from shark attacks is very small (about 1.2) and has scarcely changed over several decades.[7] Notwithstanding, the idea that coastal locations are places in which people are increasingly at risk because of sharks' growing encroachment is one that the media and other organizations have stridently parlayed for some time.

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[6] The next section in particular draws on ethnographic fieldwork which I carried out on Eyre Peninsula and neighbouring Yorke Peninsula in 2005.

[7] Amongst the most reliable sources of information is the International Shark Attack File at the University of Florida, which reported in 2007 that: 'The number of shark attacks worldwide increased to 62 in 2006 from 61 the previous year, but the number of those proving deadly was unchanged at four' (http://edition.cnn.com/2007/TECH/science/02/13/sharks.reut/index.htm.) The low level of annual deaths in Australia is consistent with the pattern across the world. It is when several attacks, even though non-deadly, occur in quick succession that headlines such as 'Feeding frenzy' (*The Advertiser* (03. 03. 09) and 'Shark Attack – Sydney's lethal waters' (*The Australian* 02. 03. 09) tend to flourish. In this instance, there were six recorded attacks inside two months, but more cautious and informed commentators made it clear that no statistical trend could be extrapolated from this. What seems generally agreed is that populations of particular species are on the rise, but it is revealing that these are dramatically described even in broadsheets like *The Australian* 31.12.08: 'Killer sharks on the rise, experts warn' had as its opening sentence an especially demonic characterization: 'The number of man-eating sharks in Australian waters is growing, according to experts, who blame the surging numbers on a ban on killing the predators.'

Several incidents since 2000 have contributed to the demonization of sharks in Australian coastal waters. Here are just three:

Case 1: In late 2000, a 49-year old swimmer was taken by a white pointer when just 40 metres from the shore at North Cottesloe, a prosperous Perth suburb. Ken Crew was scarce out of his depth when the 4.5 metre shark attacked, which was why two other swimmers were able to get him onto the beach where he died. A local journalist who happened to be on the spot was struck by the fact that when the siren signalling danger went off most people stayed in the water: 'It's because we think, or used to think, we had some God-given right to this piece of water. Fatal shark attacks happen off the south coast. They don't happen in a metre of water just a few metres from our beach' (*The Weekend Australian Magazine* 06-07. 01. 01).

Case 2: On the other side of the country in 2003, an 84-year old swimmer was taken by a bull whaler, a species locally referred to as 'pit bulls' and characterized as 'short but ferocious.' Bob Purcell was not taken out at sea but at Burleigh Lake which is part of the suburban Gold Coast's network of canals and lakes. As this network has expanded, bull whalers have migrated from the ocean and 'set up home in the Gold Coast's backyard (and) made the waterways part of their habitat' (*Good Weekend Magazine* 18-19. 01. 03). The victim's partner provided the most telling reaction: 'He was only a couple of metres from our little beach. It just seems so wrong that a man like Bob should have lost his life in such a silly way.'

Case 3: Two years later, an 18-year old South Australian surfer was taken as he was pulled on a small board behind a fast-moving dinghy. Nick Peterson's friends tried to drive off the two sharks with paddles, but to no avail. All this took place just 400 metres from the shore, and only a few kilometres from Adelaide's CBD from which the media descended in droves to provide on-the-spot coverage. One of the victim's teenage friends had no doubt what should happen next: 'I want this one killed because it's too close to the shore and has a taste for blood now … It was too close to West Beach, it was ridiculous' (*The Weekend Australian* 18-19. 12. 04).

The first point to note about each of these incidents, and others like them, is that the shark is considered to be seriously out of place because of its encroachment on locales considered the preserve of people.[8] Throughout, the shark is the transgressor by virtue of having crossed an imagined boundary which separates places for animals from places for people, and thus becomes fair game for those who propose harsh counter-measures. Suburban beaches, coastal canals and extensions into the sea such as piers and jetties can all be considered liminal spaces in the sense that they are neither land nor sea. But this uncertainty in no way prevents people from drawing a boundary somewhere, and then pressing the judgement that four, 40 or 400 metres is 'too close' or 'too near' for a shark to be.

The second point is that the language of demonization becomes public and pervasive once the transgressive act has occurred. The shark is not merely out of place but is also threatening, dangerous, violent and even diabolic, all of which warrants an equally destructive response. Following an attack, whether off the beach or in a man-made canal, the shark is immediately labelled 'a man-eater', 'a killer', or 'a killer-shark', as if killing and consuming its victim is what it deliberately and consciously has set out to do. Calculated intent thus gets attributed to the non-human animal in much the same way that the murder of a fellow human being is what a deviant person deliberately intended. Indeed the metaphor of criminality is amplified by the proliferation of verbs like 'cruising', 'hanging about', 'loitering', 'prowling', 'lurking', 'malingering', 'avoiding capture' and 'escaping the net.' When the relatives of (always) 'innocent victims' are asked how the 'killer shark' is to be dealt with, the response is often hyperbolic. A South Australian resident who lost his son to a man-eater in 2000 described the great whites as 'the terrorists of the water.'

The third point is that there is no recognition in these accusations of transgression, nor in the discourse of demonization,[9] that Nature is, as we would say, culturally constructed and therefore problematic. Where Nature is ('the unknown deep'), how Nature is ordered ('sharks at the top of the food chain'), and how animals behave in their local environments ('white pointers are natural born killers'), are all to be accepted as matters of fact. It is especially relevant on this count that novel patterns of shark behaviour are now considered discernible in the attacks taking place in different parts of the country. When an attack takes place nowadays, newspaper or magazine coverage often includes a chronological table of in-shore attacks over the past five to ten years, and the pattern logically culminates, of course, in the current assault.

The lesson to be extracted from such media coverage, which has by now become annually routinized, is evident enough: Nature is increasingly awry, natural forces are increasingly threatening, and something has to be done about it. It is no longer a matter of dealing with the occasional 'marauding pit bull' or lone 'rogue white pointer', though that is problematic enough. There is an emergent pattern which has to be reversed, thus making the places properly occupied by people risk-free and secure. It is a matter of putting Nature back in its place and thereby reinstating the paramountcy of culture. This is precisely what Kerkhof did, and that is exactly what speciesism is all about.

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[8] The concept of 'matter out of place' was seminally developed by Douglas (1966), and has been carried recently to conflicts between people and animals in different parts of the world. See for example, Knight (2000a, 2000b), Milton (2000), and Peace (2001, 2002, 2009). See also contributions to Cassidy and Mullin eds. (2006), and from the vantage point of institutionalized science, Lunney et al. eds. (2007).

[9] The making of monsters in specific cultural ways is variously explored in contributions to Cohen ed. (1996).

Dissenting voices, last resorts

It is important to acknowledge at this juncture that the demonization of sharks and the speciesist beliefs which underpin it do not prevail as a matter of course. There are alternate, dissenting voices which are significant enough at times to warrant media coverage: even if they fail to gain extensive traction, they can be considered newsworthy because of their emotional properties. The common emphasis in these dissenting voices is that a shark should not be killed in the aftermath of any attack, and this opinion is articulated by those who not only consider themselves environmentally aware but are adamant that they speak on behalf of the shark's victim as well.

For example, shortly after the death of Nick Peterson (Case 3 above), a second young man was killed in South Australian waters whilst on a diving expedition only a short distance from the shoreline as part of his tertiary-level education in marine biology. Because the two fatal attacks were on young men in the same coastal area and were separated by only eight months, Jarrod Stehbens demise attracted a great deal of media coverage, and the prospect of killing the shark responsible was immediately mooted by the authorities. Without hesitation, the Stehbens family and their son's friends announced to the press that 'Jarrod would have been absolutely appalled' (*The Australian* 26. 08. 05) at the suggestion. The victim's father related that when Nick Peterson was taken the previous year, 'Jarrod told him he was not worried about sharks … The pair had discussed calls to hunt and kill sharks that had taken people - calls Jarrod did not support. "He's a marine biologist, he wouldn't want that," Mr Stehbens said.'

In Western Australia three years later, a 51-year old banker, who was snorkelling in no more than four or five metres of water, was killed by a shark. On this occasion, in addition to his family being adamant from the outset that the shark should not become the target of 'a revenge killing' - 'Dad loved and respected the ocean environment, he was brought up in it' -, it transpired that in 2004 Brian Guest had expressed his own opinion in the website forum of an anglers' magazine: 'I have always had an understanding with my wife that if a shark caused my death then so be it, at least I was doing what I wanted.' The following year, he had added to his entry: 'They (the sharks) got a right to be there, we got a right to go there, and there are risks associated with everything, but I don't believe the correct way of reducing our risk is to kill the shark' (*The Sunday Times* 28.12.08).

In such instances, then, relatives and friends of the victim do not share the view that the shark has crossed a boundary into terrain which should be exclusive to people: they emphasize that the shark was in its natural element. They characteristically abhor any suggestion of 'revenge killing' since the shark was simply doing 'what came naturally', that is searching for food. Most important, they stress that the victim and they themselves well knew the risks being taken when swimming, surfing, or diving in waters inhabited by sharks. The obstacle they face to effectively articulating what all consider to be an environmentally enlightened position is that it quickly falls foul of well-organized groups with considerable political clout: 'Kill rogue shark if it lingers at beach, marine experts say' read the headline in *The West Australian* (29. 12. 08) just two days after Guest's demise. In such situations, fishermen, shark hunters, dive company operators, government scientists, state politicians and others rarely depart from the conventional view that sharks have no right to be in the coastal places occupied by people, and that the latter's sense of safety and security should take precedence over all other considerations. If this means sacrificing members of an endangered species, which in Australia includes the white pointer, then so be it.

It is not unusual for politicians to express regret that such a course of action has to be taken, but especially when two or three shark attacks (including non-fatal ones) occur in quick succession, there is little hesitation. A case in point occurred in Western Australia shortly before the death of Guest. Under the headline 'Die, killer sharks: Carpenter,' *The Claremont Nedlands Post* (09. 12. 06) enthusiastically reported that the State Premier had announced that, in the event of another attack in local waters, 'he would not hesitate to issue an order to kill the protected great white shark rather than catch it.' Naturally, this would be done with some regret and as a last resort; however in the words of Premier Carpenter:

> "the reality is we're in there. We're in the water at the beach, and if a shark is in there threatening human life, as sad for the shark as that may be, I wouldn't have any hesitation in having it killed … I am the Premier. I know what I'd do."

It is by no means inevitable that this official position translates into the killing of sharks; it is notoriously difficult to identify the shark responsible for any attack. But when the threat is carried out, it is generally done quietly in order to avoid adverse reaction from the victim's relatives and friends, or querulous urban environmental networks.

In remote Louth Bay, by contrast, there was no such prospect when Phillip Kerkhof killed his bronze whaler, because from the vantage point of rural folk like the bricklayer, his wife and his mates, the very idea that wild animals - and most especially sharks for reasons which should by now be clear - might be entitled to their own space, to be left alone, and even to be accorded some respect in a universe dominated by people, is not just foolish but outright nonsense. The rural habitus which is deeply ingrained in small communities like Louth Bay is such that claims like this tend to be regarded as the emotional indulgence of city-based middle classes. They are perceived as indicative of an alien belief system which has no relevance to the pragmatic, utilitarian approach which rural people must bring to their everyday lives, including the treatment of animals, whether domesticated or wild.

I suggest that this is why Phillip Kerkhof received the accolade and approbation which his gratuitous killing of the bronze whaler was considered to deserve. For what was above all striking and symbolic about Kerkhof's behaviour was its elementary, uncomplicated and straightforward character. In grabbing the inquisitive ‘bronzey’, in single-handedly manhandling it onto the jetty, and finally in killing and eating it, what Kerkhof surely accomplished was a reassertion of the supremacy of culture over Nature in an elementarily physical, emotionally rudimentary way. His spontaneous, impetuous performance constituted a symbolic reversal of the pattern of increasing encroachment by sharks into the places reserved for people. In a brief, out-of-control moment, and entirely on his own account, the vodka-fuelled bricklayer achieved what most people could scarcely imagine. He subordinated an invasive and intrusive Nature to his own unqualified and uncompromising control, and then proceeded to the symbolic heights of transforming his trophy from the raw to the cooked before finally eating it. It is difficult to imagine a single sequence of action which might more clearly express the essence of speciesism than the execution of the bronze whaler at Louth Bay. In it was strikingly distilled the taken-for-granted, commonsensical belief that an animal’s life can be taken for the sake of it, even when on the assailant’s side there is not the slightest need, warrant or justification for doing so.

Nature strikes back

If that was all there was to this incident, then to be sure it would be only of interest to a minority of people intrigued by the minutiae of human-animal encounters, just worth the effort of salvaging from the ephemerality of media coverage, but not a great deal more. The critical consideration I want to add, therefore, is that a similar range of judgements and attitudes was exposed by one of the most attention-garnering conflicts between people and wild creatures in recent times, namely the death of the environmental entrepreneur Steve Irwin as a result of a sting ray attack. In this instance, the emergence of competing discourses over the event’s significance received media attention throughout the world. But such was the hostility that was generated around his dramatic demise that the speciesism which underpinned much of Irwin’s customary behaviour was inclined to get erased from view. Obviously, in moving from a local parochial context to one of national public significance, the inference is that the same speciesist way of thinking is pervasive at different levels of Australian society.

To briefly summarize the sequence of these events, Irwin was killed by a sting ray barb driven into his chest in early September 2006, whilst making an underwater nature film on the Great Barrier Reef. No sooner was his death reported that a process of sanctification got underway. From local tabloids through to the columns of *Newsweek*, from commercial television channels through to the ABC, hagiographic accounts of Irwin followed hot on the heels of one another.[10] Outside his Australia Zoo at Beerwah on the Sunshine Coast, masses of flowers and messages of condolence inscribed on Irwin’s invariable khaki attire hung across the front entrance. At the other end of the social spectrum, the Prime Minister, who had offered the family a state funeral,[11] eulogized to the nation’s press: ‘He was the genuine article. What you saw was what you got. He took risks, he enjoyed life, he brought immense joy to millions of people.’ What warrants noting about these tributes is the extent to which the personality traits attributed to Irwin were also those displayed by Kerkhof: overtly ocker, disarmingly idiotic, distinctly larrikin. One extended commentary on Irwin’s demise detailed the ways in which several prominent Australians used Irwin to expose ‘the kernel of the Australian character.’[12]

The chief explanation of Irwin’s demise was provided by those who accompanied him at the time. It had not been the film crew’s intent to include sting rays in their documentary. It was by chance, during a break in the filming routine, that Irwin had become aware of this creature in the vicinity. Then he had swum over the top of the sting ray so that he was ‘too close’ or ‘too near’, whereupon it had struck with devastating consequences.[13]

From this perspective, the incident was simply unfortunate, immensely sad but basically bad luck. But this explanation proved too shallow for the academic and social commentator Germaine Greer, whose chief fault (if that’s what it was) lay in the timing of her intervention in this unfolding narrative of modern sainthood. Similar views to Greer’s, also aggressively worded, were aired by other media commentators.[14] But Greer was first off the block with an article first published in *The Guardian* (05. 09. 06) and reprinted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (06. 09. 06) under the headline ‘The animal world got its revenge,’ and it was forthrightly unsympathetic about Irwin’s untimely death. Crudely summarized, Irwin got his due and the paragraph from Greer’s column which most offended ran as follows:

> What Irwin never seemed to understand was that animals need space … There was no habitat, no matter how fragile or finely balanced, that Irwin hesitated to barge into, trumpeting his wonder and amazement for the skies. There was not an animal he was not prepared to manhandle. Every creature he brandished at the camera was in distress. Every snake badgered by Irwin was at a huge disadvantage, with only a single possible reaction to its terrifying situation, which was to strike … Some snakes are described as aggressive,

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[10] The Australian tabloids apart, one of the most detailed contributions came from *The Bulletin* 12. 09. 06 in ‘A Special Tribute: Steve Irwin 1962-2006. The Life and Tragic Death of an Aussie Legend’, which included a front cover photograph of Irwin, his face a mere few inches from a doubtless lethal snake. The sanctification of this ‘Aussie legend’ extended to a book-length study by Shears (2006), as well as book and article-length accounts from within the Irwin family circle.

[11] As reported in *The Australian* 06. 09. 06 under the headline ‘PM offers Terri a State Memorial.’

[12] Steve Waldon ‘Hunt continues for the elusive dinkum Aussie – or is the notion just a crock?’ *The Age* 09. 09. 06.

[13] As reported in *The Guardian* (05. 09. 06) under the headline ’Freak clash with stingray kills “wildlife warrior bloke.’”

[14] Notably by Tracee Hutchinson in *The Age* 09. 09. 06 ‘So what’s wrong with Greer’s comments?’, Errol Simper in *The Australian* 17. 09. 06 ‘We’re all prone to instinctive displays’, and Paddy McGuinness on Crikey.com 17. 09. 06, ‘Germaine is right, Irwin took silly risks.’

> but, if you're a snake, unprovoked aggression doesn't make sense. Snakes on a plane only want to get off. But Irwin was an entertainer, a 21st century version of a lion-tamer, with crocodiles instead of lions.

Greer herself does not use the term speciesism, but clearly this critique of Irwin's customary behaviour towards non-human animals is fully consistent with the definition provided at the outset to this paper. At all turns, Greer is arguing, wild animals were physically manhandled and symbolically manipulated in order to serve Irwin's entrepreneurial ambitions. Whatever indignity or abuse was called for in order to render wild animals appealing and amusing to his media audiences, Irwin was always prepared to make them fit the bill. They had no identity, status or rights which protected them from unqualified commercial exploitation.

There are two points which are important to stress about Greer's critique of Irwin's speciesist mentality and conduct, the first being that she was instantly and roundedly abused by a broad spectrum of opinion makers. Of course Greer was, as she remains, no media innocent: she has long sought out and thrived on controversy. But even as a seasoned campaigner, she might have been taken aback at the vitriol which her column generated. For her efforts, Greer was variously tagged as 'a feral hag', 'a hideous old cow', 'a batty loudmouth', 'a harridan', and 'the childless former *Celebrity Big Brother* contestant.'[15] As Tumarkin (2007) eventually summarized:

> Whatever truth there was in what Greer had to say, and there was certainly a great deal of hard truth in her words, her comments were widely received as hero-bashing at its most mean-spirited and self-serving. If her intention was to provoke, Greer provoked in the main the most personal and ugly kind of backlash.

The second point is that, notwithstanding the intensity of this backlash, there was little that was especially new to the claim that Irwin blundered his way into all manner of animal habitats, that he turned wilderness settings into mere extensions of his commercial enterprise, and that wild animals were trivially exploited for entrepreneurial gain. Such accusations were frequent for the simple reason that they were incontrovertible, most notably when in 2004 he encroached on a seal and penguin colony in the course of making a wildlife documentary in Antarctica.[16] Cleverly choreographed by the Queensland businessman, wild animals in wild places were routinely subject to a sometimes grotesque theatre of zoo-ification: each encounter was turned into a mini-freak show quite at odds with any kind of conservation ethic. In Irwin's self-appointed role as Nature's circus master, animals paraded before the camera were objectified as dangerous, poisonous and devil-like creatures, more in line with the 19th century emphasis on a quite alien Nature than a suitably 21st century conservation ethic. This became especially evident when he became involved in a major dispute with crocodile conservationists in the Northern Territory. Although their conservation efforts were entirely conventional and legitimate by Australian standards, Irwin abused them as 'Hitlers of wildlife.'[17]

So if Phillip Kerkhof's goal was to entrap the lone shark that had intruded on his fishing space below the jetty, Steve Irwin's was to physically and symbolically dominate many of the animals he corralled by reducing them to the essentialist status of deadly creatures. 'Ocean's Deadliest' – the title of the program on which he was working when he died – well-summarized what his nature programs set out to do. In an opinion piece[18] published a couple of days after Greer's contribution, Clive Hamilton initially sketched a calculated comparison between David Attenborough's prudent, near-reverential posture towards Nature and Irwin's 'high octane clowning.' He then assessed the latter's performative style like this:

> Irwin created a new genre of documentary called "nature nasty" which rejects attempts to portray animals in their natural environment going about their usual activities. Instead, it goes in search of the most dangerous, poisonous and bizarre, and provokes animals into extreme behaviour.

What proved especially revealing after Irwin's death was the way in which this hostile depiction from an Australian commentator was, perhaps unwittingly, endorsed by the international media managers who had transformed him into a global media star. In the United States, where Irwin's popularity had long outstretched that which he enjoyed in his home country, his career was fabricated by the Discovery cable television network. The network's 'Vice-President (Creative Development and Brand Management)' was nothing if not candid in explaining how the American corporation carefully orchestrated Irwin's appeal:

> "It was not just someone doing a voice-over of a wildlife show of gazelles being chased by leopards in Africa. He brought to the front pages of television *the types of animals that had never really been pin-ups … the kinds that were always seen as scary and out to get humans*" (my emphasis).[19]

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[15] As summarized by Errol Simper in his weekly opinion column in *The Australian* 14. 09. 06 under the headline 'We're all prone to instinctive displays.'

[16] These claims were considered so serious as to warrant attention in a feature article in *The Bulletin* 20. 01. 04, two years before Irwin's death. The front cover bore a picture of Irwin and the caption 'See ya later alligator. Is Steve Irwin predator or prey?' Greer subsequently suggested that official action against Irwin because of his improper conduct in the Antarctic was dropped because of his close association with then Prime Minister Howard.

[17] As reported in *The Bulletin* 20. 01. 04 under the headline 'Crocodile tears.'

[18] 'Death becomes an excuse to savage 'elites' – now that's nasty,' in *The Sydney Morning Herald* 08. 09. 06.

[19] As reported in a lengthy piece on "Planet Irwin', *The Age* 09. 09. 06.

Despite such insider confirmation of precisely the charges levelled at Irwin by his critics, the importance of Greer's central proposition about animals needing their own space and, by obvious implication, being ethically entitled to it, was scarcely picked up. It was either instantly derided on talkback radio as emanating from the 'lunatic fringe' of the conservation movement ('the Greenies' being by now a term of full-on disparagement), or it was simply ignored as the personalized invective began to flow. What was at stake, henceforth, for those who exercised power over this situation was defence of the zoo-owning businessman's public reputation rather than debating the proposition that animals had a moral entitlement to their own space in the world. In much the same way that media coverage of Kerkhof's larrikin-like behaviour usurped acknowledgement of the shark's inconsequential death at Louth Bay, Irwin's image as a genuine ocker identity was zealously guarded in such a way as to ensure that the prospects for Greer's critique of his speciesist mentality receiving recognition were negligible.

Conclusion

My concern has been to establish a connection or an association between two quite disparate, yet similarly intriguing, events in order to draw out a way of thinking about wild animals that is of significant environmental consequence for contemporary Australia. At first glance, there is nothing to specifically link or connect Kerkhof's killing of the bronze whaler in South Australia with the sting ray's killing of Irwin in Queensland. Each appears a discrete, disconnected occurrence, equally the product of serendipitous circumstances, certainly not part of a discernible pattern. I have argued that the two events are indicative and constitutive of a persistent and pervasive mentality, at the core of which lies the belief that wild animals can be manipulated and exploited, commercialized and corralled, commodified and culled at human will, and often enough at human whim also. Notwithstanding the considerable strides taken in recent decades on human rights in Australia, the principles and practicalities of relations between people and wild animals have scarcely been debated.

By tracing a line of speciesist thinking from the minor incident at Louth Bay to the major event on the Great Barrier Reef, with sketches of several shark attacks bracketed between them, I have tried to indicate the pervasiveness of this mentality in the society at large. But it is certainly necessary to repeat that, as with other powerful '-isms' in Western societies, speciesism is not monolithic. In certain situations and at specific times, alternative discourses are articulated, and they sometimes attract the media gaze as well. Where they involve a significant celebrity, such as a film star or rock musician, or where they demonstrate an appealing human or emotional side, then the gaze can be quite intense. But the reporting of such alternative discourses is rarely enduring and it can even serve to detract attention from other significant considerations that, paradoxically, can also be picked up on by the media.

In late 2004, for example, a feature article in *The Weekend Australian Magazine* (13-14. 11. 04) was entitled 'Blood in the Water', and the lead-in read: 'While another fatal attack inspired fresh public fear this year, it is the sharks that should be nervous.' The attack in question was quickly followed by statements from the victim's family that the shark should not be killed. However, as the reporter summarized the situation: 'After July's fatal attack on veteran surfer Brad Smith, police and fisheries officers had orders to "shoot to kill" the offending Great White.' The main theme, however, was the extent to which the reporting of such dramatic incidents was not matched by coverage of the enormous impact of commercial and illegal shark fishing off the Australian coastline:

> "Shark bites man" is a shocking tragedy that makes international headlines for understandable reasons. Yet "man attacks shark" is a daily reality, a little-publicised but unfolding crisis in the world's oceans, where shark numbers are spiralling downwards.
>
> The world's 700 shark species - only a handful of which are considered dangerous to man, and 160 species of which are found in Australia - are in deep trouble.

Clearly, although this is by no means a significant critique of speciesist thinking,[20] it effectively makes the point that media coverage of untrammelled exploitation of wild creatures can take many twists and turns. This needs to be acknowledged. But it is equally important not to overstate the power of the media either, for the institutional structures which are much more consequential in framing and determining the patterns and processes of human-wildlife interrelationships are predominantly governmental in character. The audit culture which is so integral to the neo-liberal governance of contemporary society is by no means restricted to narrowly constraining the relations between people.[21] It extends to the proliferation of rules and regulations about the relationships between people and wild animals as well. This can only be achieved through the promulgation and enforcement of bureaucratically determined categories and classes, many of which are, in historical terms, arbitrarily established.

This brings the argument back to the somewhat throw-away conclusion to the minor newspaper item which, it will be recalled, aimed to both report on and justify Kerkhof's killing of his shark: 'the bronze whaler is not an endangered species.' For in the last analysis, it is precisely such categorical distinctions as the one between endangered and non-endangered animals that emanate from governmental bodies and are inherently speciesist in character, which encourage and foster the same mentality in the society and large. What is crucial to recognize is that the linguistic distinction between endangered and non-endangered wild species, which is always presented as being scientifically-grounded rather than politically-driven, involves on the one hand a wholesale rejection of the idea that all animals might have rights, and on the other an unqualified acceptance of the notion that they are to be treated differently according to humans' material needs. Endangered animals are to be saved in order that we can exploit them in old and new ways at a later date when their numbers have recovered: non-endangered species can continue to be exploited as currently, and until such point that their existence becomes problematic according to our criteria and our needs.

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[20] The relationship between individual animal deaths and wider processes of animal slaughter is explored by Burt (2006).

[21] This line of argument is developed at length in Peace (2009).

The enduring effect of this kind of classification and categorization is to make some arbitrarily-designated wild animals the target of a remorseless fetishism, whilst the fate of others remains a matter of slight concern. Not only will an endangered species be protected from further human predation: it will also become the object of scientific research, commercial advertising, the tourist gaze and, not least significant, calculated manipulation by environmental groups. Such select species are not just physically protected by the label: they are endowed with charisma, invested with symbolic value, and ascribed properties that make them emblematic of a pristine and raw Nature. Saving an endangered species becomes a condensed symbol of broader efforts to save the planet.

For an animal not to be heralded as endangered, the future could scarcely be more different, the most important consideration being that it remains fair game for all and sundry. It can often be trapped, hunted, and killed with impunity - all this to the tipping point of extinction, at which stage it might be reassessed, re-categorized and redefined in such a way as to cross the divide into sanctified endangerment. This is what is happening to shark populations presently in Australian waters: several species are being remorselessly hunted until, as was the experience of the white pointer less than a decade ago, their scarcity will render them uneconomic as a commodity, whereupon they might be transformed into an icon of Nature instead. In other words, the distinction between endangered and non-endangered animals is not in any sense an index of growing ecological enlightenment, as formal environmental organizations loudly proclaim on their own behalf: it is a further expression of speciesism, and needs to be acknowledged as such. To be sure, it is subtler than the destructive behaviour of the little known Kerkhof, and it is more discrete than the media-directed conduct of the renowned Irwin. But it is the production of such arbitrary distinctions at the higher levels of governmental institutions which encourages and legitimizes the reproduction of speciesist behaviour in the wider social order. This being so, it is most unlikely that those minority voices which dissent against the pervasiveness and power of institutionalized speciesism will realize much significant effect in the foreseeable future.

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